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ABSTRACT

This abstract and outline for a workshop explore the use of focus groups in evaluation. Cerritos College in Norwalk (California) conducted a series of focus groups to evaluate a new matriculation program. A focus group is a technique often used in marketing research to explore a specific topic. It is a group interview conducted in a casual setting that usually consists of 4 to 12 participants. Participants may speak their minds in an anonymous setting, guided by a moderator who keeps the interview flowing smoothly. Cerritos College used focus groups to get suggestions from staff members who would work directly with the changes brought about by the matriculation program. The staff was thus able to structure a program that would cause a number of changes in their working routines. The workshop outline reviews choosing a moderator, selecting participants, and evaluating and disseminating information. (SLD)

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Focus Groups As An Evaluation Tool

Paul Creason, Cerritos College

Cerritos College conducted a series of focus groups to evaluate the matriculation program. A focus group is a technique often used in marketing research that is designed to answer questions about a specific topic. It is a group interview conducted in a casual setting and usually consists of 4 to 12 participants. The goal of a focus group is to allow the participants to speak their minds about a specific issue in an anonymous setting. This results in a more realistic appraisal of the topic in question. A focus group is guided by the focus group moderator. The moderator keeps the interview flowing smoothly and facilitates the conversation within the group.

Focus groups allow one to address a certain topic and the opinion of those in the group. The interview is conducted in a casual setting to enhance the conversation and to allow the participants to express their true opinions. The interviews are void of any outside pressure from supervisors and are kept completely anonymous. This anonymity assures the participants that they will not be reprimanded for any criticisms that they make. Therefore, the technique often allows the interviewer to get to the heart of certain matters and the participants are less hesitant to discuss certain things.

Cerritos College conducted a series of focus groups with classified staff to evaluate the matriculation program on campus. The College was interested in collecting some qualitative data to complement the quantitative data that had already been collected. Cerritos used focus groups to get suggestions from staff members who would work directly with the changes brought about by matriculation. Some of the programs had not even been implemented, and the matriculation coordinator was able to make improvements based on the information before the programs began.

The purpose of the focus groups was twofold. First, they allowed the classified staff to participate in helping to structure a program that was going to bring about numerous changes in their working routine. Second, it was an excellent method of informing the employees about the benefits of matriculation and to explain the various components of the matriculation program.

The staff was interviewed one year after the programs were in place to see if they had any more suggestions that would help to iron out any bugs. The matriculation coordinator thought that interviewing classified staff would be very helpful because they were the ones who encountered the students and the changes brought about by matriculation on a daily basis. The information collected at Cerritos College has been very helpful in implementing, maintaining, and improving our matriculation program.

This workshop will demonstrate how to evaluate numerous programs on your campus using focus groups. It will touch on choosing a moderator, selecting participants for focus group research, and evaluating and disseminating the information.

TM 020618

Introduction to Focus Groups

I. What is a focus group

A. The introduction of focus groups began in the social sciences by Robert Merton who used focus groups to examine the persuasiveness of wartime propaganda efforts.

B. A focus group is a technique often used in marketing research that is designed to answer specific questions about a specific topic.

C. It is a group interview conducted in a casual setting and usually consists of 4-12 participants.

D. The focus group moderator keeps the interview flowing smoothly and facilitates the conversation within the group.

II. The purpose of a focus group

A. The goal of a focus group is to allow the participants to speak their minds about a specific issue in an anonymous setting. This results in a more realistic appraisal of the topic in question.

B. Focus groups constitute one specific technique within the broader category of group interviewing to collect qualitative data.

1. Qualitative data
2. Quantitative data

C. Focus groups are best suited to study attitudes and cognitions. The advantage is the ability to conduct the research with less in the way of a prepared interview. Of course, the price one pays is relatively chaotic data collection.

D. One can observe a large amount of information in a limited period of time. Persons one on one may not speak up. However, in a focus group people get on a roll and stimulate other conversation.

E. As a technique, focus groups emphasize keeping the participants discussing a subject until their points of agreement and disagreement become apparent. This often means that participants become consciously aware of their own perspectives when confronted with an active disagreement or an explicit attempt to reach conclusions.

III. Recording and Analyzing Data

A. Data collection can be very chaotic and time consuming.

1. Tape recording - tape the interview, but in an anonymous way so that the participants are not hesitant to speak their minds. Assure them that you will be the only one who listens to the tape.

2. Using a recorder or notetaker - you can have someone take notes or minutes for the interview, however, you may sacrifice some accuracy.

3. Taking notes yourself - this is not suggested, it is too hard to take notes and keep a focus group running smoothly.

B. Do not underestimate the amount of time that data collection can take. It is very time consuming, but the information that is obtained can be very beneficial to the program.

C. The information is qualitative data - decisions made will help to modify and fine-tune the programs, but it is not the opinions of the entire college. Need to let those who will receive the report know the proper use and abuse of this type of information.

IV. Disseminating the information.

A. To the participants to clarify/check their responses.

B. To those involved in the study.

C. To the appropriate personnel.

Tips for Focus Group Research

Know your topic!

Unstructured interviews: Open window techniques. What do you see or what do you think of when you picture [*topic*]. What would you change about [*topic*]? After a very general statement, let the group lead the discussion until they begin to get off the track.

Structured interviews: Particular questions in mind and relatively stringent control of the group and the discussion - must always be flexible though.

Stress the importance of the research and how it is going to be used.

Make everyone feel at ease. Make the setting as casual as can be. Make all conversation informal, but important.

Stress that everyone's perspective and opinion is needed, even if they have conflicting views. Emphasize that you want as many points of view as possible. "If your experience or perception is different, that is exactly what we want to know."

Moderator Involvement:

At the low end: moderators play only a small role in ongoing group discussion and attempt to keep their comments as non-directive as possible.

At the high end: moderators control both the set of topics that are discussed and the dynamics of the group discussion. The goal is to get the most material from the participants as you can.

A moderator must understand empathy and flow with the emotions of the group, but there must also be disciplined detachment. Do not put words in the participants mouths.

Make sure "group think" doesn't stifle opinions that differ from the majority. Single out people's opinions and ask if anyone has anything to add or if they have a different perspective or idea. Also, in order to get everyone involved, tactfully single a person out who hasn't said much and try to get their opinion.

Based on past sessions, do not lead the groups into a particular area or topic if you can help it. You can guide them subtlely, but do not direct the conversation. If conversation slows down maybe say "Yeah, but what do you think about [*topic*]."

Remember, you are there to guide the group, try not to let them get off track, unless you see them going somewhere with the conversation.

Legitimate the participants right to manage the discussion by creating a self-fulfilling prophecy: "If you tend to get of track, someone will usually pull the group back to the [*topic*]. I'll jump in if I have to, but usually one of you takes care of that."

Cue the interaction in the group if the conversation slows or stops. "Just remember what we are talking about is [*topic, detail about the topic, related topic*]." This will help to restart the conversation.

A moderator's job is to always:

Guide
Enhance
Cue
Expand
Listen

Always direct the focus group, but in a non-directive way!